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THE

Ancient Phonetic Alphabet

OF

YUCATAN.

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OST readers are quite familiar with the fact that a well-developed method of picture writing, or "didactic painting," as it has been appropriately named, prevailed through Mexico and Central America for centuries before the conquest. But that, in the latter country, there was a true phonetic alphabet, is one of the more recent discoveries of American archæology, and certainly one of the most interesting, as it promises to restore to us the records of the most cultivated nation of ancient America for a number of centuries previous to the advent of the white man.

It is well-known that the forests of Yucatan conceal the ruins of cities and palaces built of stones covered with inscribed characters. All travelers who had seen these characters were convinced that they were intended to perpetuate ideas, but the key seemed to be irrevocably lost. Fortunately, within the last few years (to be exact, in December, 1863), a diligent antiquarian, the Abbé Brasseur de Bourbourg, unearthed in a library in Madrid—that of the Royal Academy of History—a copy of an unpublished description of Yucatan composed by Diego de Landa, the first bishop of the country. In this was contained the phonetic alphabet employed by the aboriginal Mayas, with a tolerably full, but an intolerably obscure, explanation of their mode of using it. As De Landa's words are so important, and also not a little difficult to comprehend, we cannot do better than transcribe them exactly as they appear in the copy of his work published at Paris, in 1864.

He premises his remarks by saying that the natives used certain characters or letters with which they wrote in books their ancient histories and sciences, and by means of these letters, and figures, and certain signs in the figures, they could understand and teach from these manuscripts. The missionaries found very many of them, all of which, the good bishop informs us, proved on examination to contain more lies and superstitions, and were consequently burned, which pained the natives in the most marvelous manner (lo qual a maravilla sentian, y les dava pena).

He then continues:—

"De sus letras porné aquí un *a*, *b*, *c*, que no permite su pesadumbre mas, porque usan para todas las aspiraciones de las letras de un caracter, y despues, al puntar de las partes otro, y assi viene a hazer *in infinitum*, como se podra ver en el siguiente exemplo. *Lé* quiere dezir laço y caçar con el; para escribirle con

sus caracteres, haviendolos nosotros hecho entender que son dos letras, lo escrivian ellos con tres, poniendo a la aspiracion de la *l* la vocal *é*, que antes de si trae, y en esto no hierran, aunque usense, si quisieron ellos de su curiosidad. Exemplo:—



Dèsques al cabo le pegan la parte junta. *Ha* que quiere dezir agua, porque la *haché* tiene *a*, *h*, antes de si la ponen ellos al principio con *a*, y al cabo desta manera :—



Tambien lo escriben a partes, pero de la una y otra manera, yo no pusiera aqui ni trétara dello sino por dar cuenta entera de las cosas desta gente. *Ma in kati* quiere decir no quiero, ellos lo escriben a partes desta manera :—



This is all on the subject the bishop vouchsafes us. Let us now attempt a free translation of his words, premising that they are so obscure in parts, and the composition so careless and provincial, that we shall not take it at all amiss if any reader thinks he can improve our rendering :

“Of their letters, I shall place here an A, B, C, their clumsiness not allowing more ; for they employ one character for all the aspirations of the letters, and another to denote their repetitions, and so they go on *in infinitum*, as one may see in the following example : *Le* means a lasso and to hunt with one. In order to write with their characters, although we told them it contains but two letters, they make use of three, giving to the aspiration of the *l* the vowel *é*, which is before it, and in this they are not in error, if they wish to write it in their curious manner. Example :

e l e lé

Afterwards they put at the end the part which is joined. Again in *ha*, which means water, because the letter *h* contains the sounds *a*, *h*, they place the *a* both at the beginning and at the end, in this manner :—

a h a

They can write it either with separate letters or united together. I would not have inserted nor have mentioned this but that I wished to give a complete description of this people. *Ma in kati* means *I do not wish* ; they write it in separate letters in this way :—

ma i n ka ti .”

From these valuable though too scanty hints we learn that the letters were employed connected together in a manner somewhat analogous to, though more intimately than our cursive shrift, and also separately, as in the Roman alphabet. When the latter was the case, they were repeated apparently in their connected form. Further, the vowel sound which is necessarily associated with the enunciation of every consonant (*la aspiracion*), and which in the Maya language of Yucatan is so pronounced as to have been called by the Abbé de Bourbourg, “*une certaine affectation gutturale*,” was taken account of, and expressed in writing. Then there were a number of arbitrary signs, figures, and symbols,

with syllabic values, as we see in the last example given. These peculiarities, of course, make the system clumsy, but are by no means insurmountable difficulties in the way of elucidating it.

Immediately at the close of the foregoing extract Bishop Landa gives the alphabet subjoined, which has been carefully copied on wood, by Mr. Edward Bensell, of Philadelphia, the arrangement of the letters being slightly altered :—

1		<i>a</i>	11		<i>è</i>	21		<i>n</i>
2		<i>a</i>	12		<i>h</i>	22		<i>o</i>
3		<i>a</i>	13		<i>h</i>	23		<i>o</i>
4		<i>a</i>	14		<i>ha</i>	24		<i>p</i>
5		<i>b</i>	15		<i>i</i>	25		<i>pp</i>
6		<i>b</i>	16		<i>k</i>	26		<i>x</i>
7		<i>c</i>	17		<i>ku</i>	27		<i>x</i>
8		<i>ca</i>	18		<i>l</i>	28		<i>u</i>
9			19		<i>l</i>	29		<i>u</i>
10		<i>t</i>	20		<i>m</i>	30		<i>z</i>

Besides these elementary sounds, he gives twenty arbitrary signs, one for each day of the Maya month, which signs seem also to be used at their syllabic value in writing words. All of them have the same peculiar rounded or circular form which is observable in most of the letters, and which has induced some writers to call this the "Calculiform" alphabet.

But returning to the A, B, C, let us inquire the meanings of the figures adopted. Knowing these, we shall be in better position to recognise their variations on existing inscriptions and manuscripts—for these, as we expect, are considerable; but not more so, perhaps, than the variations in the forms of the Roman letters.

a. Nos. 1, 2, and 4, are representations of the heads of some animals, No. 2 being evidently the head of a bird with a long curved beak, probably a species of parrot. No. 3 has been supposed to represent a leg or a boot of some kind, but is probably also a rude figure of a head. (See Plate XXXVI. of the *manuscript Troano*.)

b. Both these letters are supposed to represent a path or way bearing the marks of foot prints, indicated by the small figures inside the circle.

c. This letter should probably be pronounced *ka* (*a* as in *mate*), and is imagined to represent a mouth displaying sharp teeth.

ca. This sign is explained as the jaw of an animal thickly set with teeth; but a careful examination of its variations leads to the belief that it is a representation of the eye lashes. (See the *Etudes sur le Manuscrit Troano*, p. 55.)

cu. This has not been identified.

t. As there is no *d* in Maya this character stands for both *t* and *d*. It signifies space, the four marks leading towards the center representing the four cardinal points, and the phonetic base being the Maya, preposition *ti*, in, toward, at, in space.

e. Probably a front view of the human face, surmounted by the hair, the dots marking the eyes, nose and mouth.

h. Nos. 12 and 13, variations of the same, represent a joint of bamboo. No. 14 is the guttural *h*, pronounced *ha*, which word in Maya means water. The figure represents a stream flowing around some objects.

i. This letter seems formed after the analogy of *c*, but no satisfactory analysis has yet been offered.

k, ku. The *k* is beyond doubt derived from a head seen in profile. The upper figure within the circle is the closed eye with its lashes (compare No. 8); that below on the right is the ear (compare No. 28); that on the left the mouth. (See the variations in the *Etudes sur le Manuscrit Troano*, p. 55.) The *ku* is supposed to be a drawing of the sacred "medicine bag."

l. Neither of these has been resolved.

m. This also, is the figure of a head. It is distinguished from the *k* by the eye being open, from the *p* by the absence of dots around the mouth.

n. Possibly the figure of a serpent.

o. Variations of the same, of uncertain origin.

p, pp. Again the face in profile.

x. The first figure is easily recognised as the human hand, the second as a face in profile, emitting breath from the mouth.

u. The first sign represents the ear, the second is of uncertain derivation.

z. This seems to be a vase of some kind.

It is evident that many of these signs have received abbreviated and conventional forms quite remote from their original figures, precisely as we know occurred in the Phœnician and derived alphabets. The variations are numerous and puzzling.

It will be observed that the basis of most of them is a head seen in front or in profile. Bearing this in mind, and fixing definitely the differential marks, which alone were deemed of importance by the native artists, we could venture with considerable confidence on the interpretation of manuscripts and inscriptions, did we not meet with very serious obstacles in other directions.

One of these is the resolution of the groups referred to by Landa as *las partes juntas*. In these the rounded "Calculiform" letters are arranged in quadrilateral masses, each representing a phrase, name, or title. We may seek the origin of this arrangement in what philologists call the incorporative, or "polysynthetic" character of the Maya in common with all other American tongues, which tends to the expression of an idea with all its modifications, in one intricate grammatical synthesis. These groups must first be separated in their component parts, and then arranged in proper order. Some of them read from right to left, and alternately from top to bottom and bottom to top; or, to illustrate by a diagram, as if we were to write the word *marvelous*, thus:—

O	L	M
U	E	A
S	V	R

But the artist had no hesitation in changing this arrangement, if another would allow him to compose a neater group. Especially is this the case on the sculptures, where the love of ornamentations constantly obscures the design and renders the letters almost unre-



cognisable, precisely as the fashion is at the present day to adorn the walls of our churches with inscriptions in ornamental and Gothic characters, hardly legible to unpracticed eyes.

There is also an obstacle in the very limited number of manuscripts in this character which have been preserved. Of the vast number found among the natives at the conquest, only three or four are known to be in existence. One of these is the "Dresden Manuscript," another the "Manuscript Troano," the third the "Manuscrit Mexican, No. 2," of the Bibliothèque Impériale; and perhaps the "Pesth Manuscript" is in the same shrift. Of these the Dresden Manuscript may be seen in the large collection of Lord Kingsborough on Mexican Antiquities, and the Manuscript Troano was published in fac simile by the French government under the editorship of M. Brasseur de Bourbourg. (*Mission Scientifique au Mexique et à l'Amérique Centrale, Linguistique*. Paris, 1869. Imprimerie Impériale.) There is, however, material almost inexhaustible in the inscriptions preserved upon the stone temples, altars, and pillars of Yucatan, which we may with great confidence look to see deciphered before many years.

The only serious difficulty which is at present in the way is our want of knowledge of the ancient Maya language. All the published grammars and vocabularies are extremely deficient and incomplete, and quite inadequate to serve us in interpreting the inscriptions. But even this alarming obstacle is only temporary. There exists in manuscript a most complete and carefully composed dictionary of the Maya, written about 1650, two copies of which are in this country, one in the hands of the Smithsonian Institution, and which we earnestly hope will shortly be published under the efficient superintendence of Dr. Hermann Berendt, the most accomplished Maya scholar living. With it in hand, the deciphering of the inscriptions of Palenque, Uxmal, Itza, and the other ruined cities of Yucatan, and of the manuscripts already mentioned, will become certainly a less serious task than that of translating the cuneiform inscriptions of Ninevah.

Even without other aids than the limited vocabularies already published, some antiquarians have boldly set to work on the Yucatecan writings. Most conspicuous of them is M. Brasseur de Bourbourg, who first published Diego de Landa's work containing the alphabet. (*Relation des choses de Yucatan de Diego de Landa. Texte espagnol et traduction française en regard, comprenant les signes du calendrier, et de l'Alphabet hiéroglyphique de la langue Maya*. Paris, 1864.

His recent edition of the Manuscript Troano is prefaced by an *Etude* in which he attempts to interpret several of its pages. It is painful to be unable to say a single word in favor of his views. They are thoroughly untenable and groundless. The Abbé Brasseur deserves the highest praise for his ardor and devotion to archæological studies, but his theories do not bear a moment's examination. They are so utterly wild that we are almost afraid to state them. He imagines that these inscriptions and manuscripts all contain geological reminiscences, chiefly concerning the submersion of a portion of the American continent and the consequent formation of the West India Islands. He explains all the letters as "expressive images of the cataclysm of which they are the phonetic expression." The culture of the Mayas and Aztecs he regards as the debris of a far higher civilization, which once extended over most of the American continent, and *from which* that of ancient Egypt (!) was derived. He insists on the identity of the ancient Maya and Aztec tongues, for which there is not a shadow of proof, and going further, claims that they are both derived from *Germanic* roots. Of course, with such notions as these, his "interpretation" of the Manuscript is an absurdity, and can never obtain a serious hearing in scientific circles.

A very different student is M. H. de Charencey, long favorably known for his researches into the Basque language, the dialects of Central America, and other critical publications. In the first volume of the *Actes la Société Philologique* (Paris, 1870) he has an "*Essai de Déchiffrement d'un Fragment d'Inscription Palenquienne*." He takes for his subject the famous "bas-relief of the Cross," found on the back of the great altar at Palenque. It is portrayed in Stephens's *Travels in Central America*, and more carefully in the work of Cabrera on the ruins of Palenque, from a drawing by M. de Waldeck. It seems to represent the ceremony of baptism, or something analogous to it. The central

figures are surrounded by inscriptions. Immediately above the bird which surmounts the cross is found this character:—



This he analyses as follows, commencing at the right: h (variation of No. 13 of the alphabet), o (variation of No. 22 enclosed in a circle), nab (the Maya word for the palm of the hand which supports the middle letter), ku (variation of No. 17),=*honabku*. This, in the orthography *hunabku*, a discrepancy of no great moment, is a familiar Maya name of divinity, and means *the only*, or *the one God*. The course of argument by which he supports this analysis is careful and judicious.

The second group which M. de Charencey analyses is this:—



This he resolves, commencing at the right hand upper figure, proceeding from above downward, and from right to left, into the following letters of Landa's alphabet:

u, ku, ku, l, ca, nab,

meaning "it, or those, of the Kukulcan." Kukulcan, however was the name of the hero god of the Mayas, corresponding to the Quetzalcoatl of the Aztecs. His worship was introduced into Yucatan subsequent to the ninth century of the Christian era, and his name means in Maya precisely what Quetzalcoatl does in Aztec, namely, "the serpent with quetzal feathers," the quetzal being a species of parrot with bright green plumage. This interpretation, therefore, if admitted, fixes an important date in Central American history; for it proves that the erection of the extraordinary monuments of Palenque, which were found in ruins at the conquest, took place subsequent to the ninth century of our era.

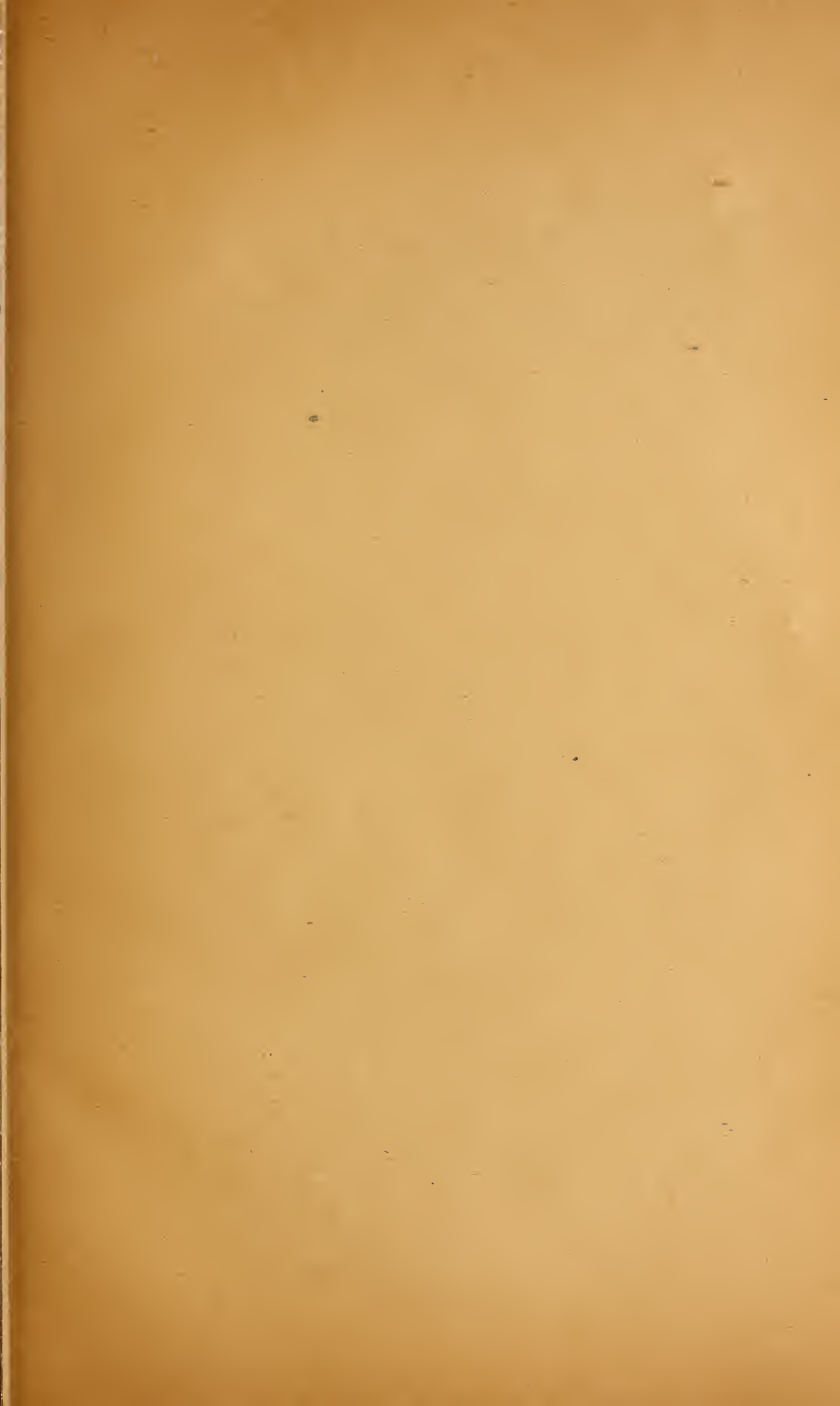
It is not our object at present to go into the details of these remarkable investigations, still less to criticise them at length, but simply to give their outlines and results. They should excite an earnest interest in this country, and stimulate our scholars to turn their attention to the antiquities of our own continent, which thus acquire an importance quite equal to those on the banks of the Euphrates and the Nile, which have commanded such profound study from European scholars.

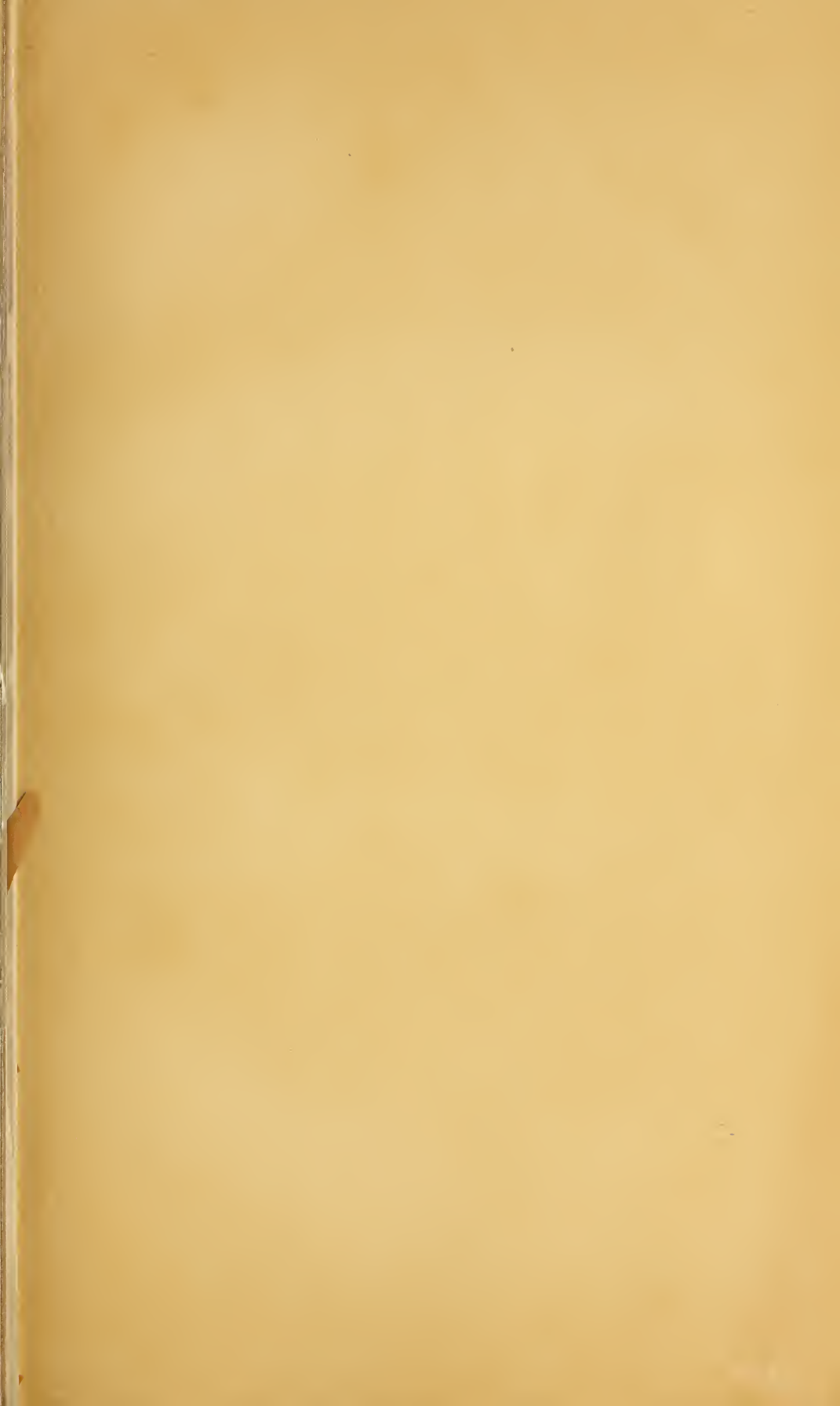












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